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The Power of Art

Aesthetics and Rock Art, edited by Thomas Heyd & John Clegg, 2005. Aldershot: Ashgate; ISBN 0-7546-3924-X hardback, £55 & US\$99.95; xxviii+316 pp., 1 table, 106 figs.

Robin Skeates

Stimulated by a recent rekindling of interest in aesthetics and visual culture in the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology, this volume focuses attention on the aesthetics of rock art. In doing so, it raises some old and new questions. What is meant by 'aesthetics' and 'art'? Is aesthetics a cross-cultural category? What can an aesthetics perspective contribute to the study, understanding and contemporary management of rock art; and can rock-art studies broaden the scope of philosophical aesthetics? Varied answers are provided by the seventeen contributors, drawing upon their expertise in archaeology, anthropology, art history, psychology and religious studies and upon their work on the rock art of four continents.

Problems with defining 'aesthetics' and 'art' are infamous, and while some of the contributors evidently struggle with these terms, others offer clarity. Heyd, Lamarque, Morphy, Domeris, Morales and Ouzman critically explore their use, and emphasize the dangers of applying conceptions of aesthetics and art across cultures based on the Western modernist tradition, characterized by a particular elitist discourse about the visual appreciation of beauty and fine art. Most would agree, however, that the continued use of these terms is inevitable, and that broad definitions are required. Domeris helpfully reminds us that the term 'aesthetics' comes from the Greek *aisthesis*, meaning 'sensation' or 'perception'. It is from this etymology, via Kant, that Morphy provides his valuable anthropological definition of aesthetics as 'the effect of the physical properties of objects on the senses, and the qualitative evaluation of those properties' (p. 53). Disappointingly, few of the contributors fully explore this multi-sensory and cultural perspective on aesthetics in their archaeological case studies, a notable exception being Ouzman's chapter on the non-visual perceptual dimensions of San rock engravings. He argues that certain of these were hammered, rubbed, cut and flaked, for the purposes of: producing trance-inducing repetitive percussive sound and stinging tactile sensations; shamanic touching of spiritually powerful images and rocks; and possessing pieces of

potent places. Instead, the contributors advocate one or a combination of three established approaches to rock art and aesthetics, whilst also acknowledging their limitations.

The 'formal approach' still dominates rock-art studies, and is the approach with which many of the contributors feel most comfortable. It characteristically involves the detailed quantitative recording of archaeological data relating to artistic materials, forms, production techniques and styles, and their patterning over space and time. However, stimulated by the theme of aesthetics, all of the contributors also extend this approach to describe a wide variety of qualitative perceptual qualities of rock art. These include the physical properties and relations of the rock surface and markings, their setting, the composition and reworking of design elements, and light effects. Ogawa, for example, describes the correspondence between the shape of the natural rock surface and the outlines of depicted animals in the French Palaeolithic cave of Fonte-de-Gaume. Eastham identifies the use of 'regressed angular' projection in representations of animals at La Grèze and Cosquer in France and Wangewangen in Australia. Nash also notes the aesthetically pleasing qualities of historic Pallava script and images inscribed on stones from Western Java. Some contributors also consider these aesthetic qualities in terms of artistic choices, intentionality and skill. Coles, for example, celebrates the aesthetic impact of the landscape settings and artistry of Bronze Age rock carvings in Scandinavia. However, a serious criticism that can be levelled at such formal studies is their reluctance to move beyond 'objective' description to the interpretation of meanings and values, which some of the contributors write off as lost and unknowable.

The 'informed approach', by contrast, engages in interpretation by focusing on the varied cultural contexts, traditions and discourses within which rock art is embedded, including the intentions of its makers and the perceptions of its audiences, both in the past and the present. Heyd and Morphy note a variety of methods that can be used to contextualize rock art. Ethnographic accounts and immediate post-colonial records, where available, can guide and ground interpretations of indigenous values. The contextual approach of archaeology promotes the identification of associations between different elements and levels of rich archaeological data sets across space and time, and the use of hypotheses to interrogate their meanings and values with reference to broader cultural and historical processes, such as boundary and identity formation. Using this approach, Stone, for example,

examines the intellectual and aesthetic impact of artistically modified stalagmites in Mesoamerican caves, arguing convincingly that they were perceived as spiritually powerful 'found' natural objects while also suggesting that their crude grotesque style represents an intentional alternative to the refined style of contemporary Classic Maya elite art. Reconstructions and re-enactments can also help archaeologists explore how rock art may have been produced and experienced. Eikelkamp, for example, details her experimental ethnographic study of the production of the Ernabella style of abstract line patterns drawn by contemporary Pitjantjatjara women in Australia's Western Desert and interprets its reproduction as an individually and culturally constrained artistic process.

Advocates and opponents of the informed approach also recognize the distance between 'us' and 'them', the cultural and aesthetic bias of the contemporary Western analyst, heritage manager and art curator, and the offence that this appropriation may cause to members of indigenous groups. Skotnes, for example, highlights the aesthetic importance of the form of the rock face, its orientation and the position of the viewer for San painters, a relationship which, she claims, has been overlooked by scholars who have approached it from the perspective of the modern Western art world. Eastham cautions against the archaeological identification of the use of perspective at rock-art sites and criticizes the distortion of their original images through drawn and photographic reproduction and the bias of different researchers' ways of seeing. Wilken also charts and theorizes the displacement of visitors' aesthetic engagements with Lascaux's Palaeolithic art by modern 'hyperreal' and 'virtual' representations, whilst also questioning the concept of the 'authentic' 'original' artwork. These examples encourage a degree of interpretative caution, but also form an integral part of a truly contextual archaeological approach to rock art.

The 'cross-cultural approach' to aesthetics rests, instead, upon the assumption that, despite diverse personal and cultural values, there is a fundamental universality in human perception. Lamarque and Morphy, in particular, argue that, although aesthetics is mediated by culture, it is also a trans-cultural phenomenon, part of the shared biology of fully modern humans, which extends back to the Upper Palaeolithic. It should belong, then, to a meta-language of socio-cultural and psychological analysis. Clegg provides a good example, emphasizing the universality of aspects of optical illusion in art, including ambiguous figures produced by figure-ground reversal and dazzle effects

produced by tricks of light which, he suggests, were intentionally exploited in the distant past, particularly in religious and consciousness-altering contexts. Derégowski also speculates that the bodies of human beings and felines, characterized by perceptually less stable typical contours than equines and bovines, are inherently more difficult to portray naturalistically by means of a line, and that this explains their relatively infrequent appearance in Palaeolithic art.

Over all, the book offers something of a mixed bag. There are at least five good papers, which genuinely attempt to tackle the difficult but important topic of aesthetics and rock art. Together, they make a strong case for the study of aesthetics to be taken seriously by researchers seeking a full-bodied understanding of the production and reception of rock art, and offer suggestions and examples of how this might be done in practice. But there is limited consensus, and a pervasive sense of caution, as many feel obliged to address and legitimize their undertaking to a traditionally sceptical rock-art studies audience (as opposed to a more receptive audience of anthropological or 'interpretative' archaeologists). Furthermore, a number of the contributors seem significantly less engaged with the topic. These problems may stem, in part, from the fact that the chapters were, originally, either presented as papers at two rock-art congresses or, in the case of four, published in other contexts some years previously. This highlights the need for fresh case studies of aesthetics and rock art, fully informed by the key concepts and approaches advocated in the first part of this book.

One theme, in particular, which might be explored further in the future, is that of power. As some of the contributors note, visually powerful art-forms can be perceived to be imbued by supernatural potency, particularly when their effect on the senses is that of an overwhelming 'anaesthetic' (e.g. Clottes, Coles, Skotnes, Stone, Ouzman). Furthermore, differential access to this power can be exploited by various people, ranging from artists to curators, as part of culturally diverse political strategies. The great potential of studying aesthetics and rock art is, then, to sense the power of art, both in the past and today.

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